DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 190 862 CE 026 434

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TITLE Basic Skills for Experiential Learning: What Skills Do Students Need to Make the Most of Experiential Learning Opportunities. LES Papers on Learning and Teaching. Paper #75.
INSTITUTION Michigan State Univ., East Lansing. Learning and Evaluation Service.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Abstract Reasoning; *Adult Education; Adult Learning; *Basic Skills; Concept Formation; Discovery Learning; *Experiential Learning; *Field Experience Programs; Observation; Observational Learning; Postsecondary Education; *Skill Analysis; Values Clarification

ABSTRACT

Identification of the basic skills and roles in field experience education should answer the question "Can and should educators identify a set of basic skills required for effective performance in experiential learning as part of general education?" New roles required of students in using experiential learning opportunities include initiator, problem solver and decision maker, cultural analyst and strategist, interactor, information source and network developer, free agent, value clarifier, communicator, and recipient. Basic skills needed are observation and recording skills, skills of reflection, gathering information orally, and value clarification. A skill needed in applying experiential learning theory is abstract conceptualization--taking observations and reflections and developing general principles, concepts, and hypotheses. Traditional learning skills serve field experience education students well in career exploration, creative problem solving, and developing learning objectives. To facilitate acquisition of these skills, one should follow a basic set of assumptions, including the following: students should be responsible for acquiring the skills and learning, discovery learning is more effective learning, and processes through which these skills can be learned should be identified and designed. The two challenges are to identify the minimum basic skills and develop experiential learning occasions through which students acquire them prior to field experience placements. (YLB)

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Basic Skills for Experiential Learning: What Skills Do Students Need To Make The Most of Experiential Learning Opportunities

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Paper # 75

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BASIC SKILLS FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

WHAT SKILLS DO STUDENTS NEED

TO MAKE THE MOST OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

One of the gaps, shortcomings or oversights of field experience education is the inadequate preparation of students for their learning in the field. Not enough attention is paid to the skills which are needed in and acquirable through almost all types of placements. The need for these skills and their availability for acquisition has to do with the differences between classroom and field learning environments. Adequately preparing students requires us to teach them the needed skills and give them opportunities to assume and become familiar with the roles and functions which they will be expected to perform. The question I wish to raise through this paper is "Can and should we identify a set of basic skills required for effective performance in experiential learning as part of the general education we desire for students and on the basis of which specialization in specific fields is possible?" I will raise the question by a preliminary identification of the basic skills and roles in field experience education as I perceive them.

I. Assumptions:

The following seven assumptions are made in the development of this paper:

1. Most students tend to persist in a dependency role throughout their schooling.*
2. Most students have had little opportunity to assume much responsibility for their own learning.*

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* Coleman, James. Youth, Transaction to Adulthood, Report on Youth to the President's Science Advisory Committee, University of Chicago Press, 1974.

3. Effective experiential learning requires students to move towards a greater degree of independence and to assume more responsibility for their learning than they have in the past.
4. To move to greater independence and the assumption of greater responsibility requires the development of new skills.
5. Some students are ready to move to new developmental stages.
6. We must respond to the developmental readiness of students.
7. Several new roles are required of students in using experiential learning opportunities. The following chart** sets forth and describes some of those roles.

Initiator	1. Identifies, seeks, finds and secures the help and cooperation needed, often in an alien context.
Problem Solver & Decision Maker	2. Functions in an open system, defining and solving the problems as they arise and making decisions in the course of carrying out the project which affect the student's life and the personal lives of others.
Cultural Analyst & Strategist	3. Understands the cultural context well enough in which work is being done to function affectively in it.
Interactor	4. Relates effectively with faculty supervisor, co-workers, clients, or customers, and is able to stay in touch with them and work through emotionally difficult relationships.

** Duley, J. S. "Field Experience Education" in On College Teaching, Milton, O. 1978, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Information Source & Network Developer	5. Develops personal information sources instead of relying on those provided by an instructor.
Free Agent	6. Functions independently in a support system where rewards are given for workable solutions to particular and often unforeseen problems rather than for predetermined correct answers to set problems, and in an unstructured setting without the classroom support system of assignment, syllabi, and tests.
Value Clarifier	7. Makes value judgments in arriving at these workable (compromise) solutions or decisions which would not be expected in classroom work.
Communicator	8. Is able to communicate effectively through the spoken and written word, through listening and reading nonverbal communication and to be emotionally involved in interpersonal interaction.
Recipient	9. Is able to receive and utilize criticism constructively.

Question:

How can we best prepare students for these new roles and help them acquire the basic skills they need in experiential learning?

II. Skills Needed:

A. Basic Skills

1. Observation and recording skills. Most students have not had much opportunity to develop accurate observation and recording skills. Their tendency in recording events is not to record the facts--what they see, observe or experience, but to record their impressions.

Students when asked to describe a village they have spent the day in are likely to indicate it was a quiet, friendly, pleasant village rather than to describe it factually and allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about the impression the village would make on one who experienced it. The ability to record accurate observation is a skill needed in every conceivable type of field experience education program.

2. Skills of reflection. Accuracy in recording observations is not enough. For learning to take place, students must reflect, that is, speculate about the alternative meanings of what has been seen, felt or experienced. We live in an action-oriented, highly stimulating, visual society that does not reward or encourage reflection. We are rewarded for keeping busy and for doing things; to sit and think about something or to reflect on the meaning of things is alien to our activist culture. Is it any wonder that students often times have difficulty in imagining alternative meanings for what they have experienced or observed? They have had little opportunity to develop the capacity for reflection.

3. Gathering information orally. Students need help in developing this skill. They have depended almost entirely in the past on print and visual sources of information and on these sources of information being provided by a teacher. In most courses a bibliography of readings is provided and the readings are placed on the reserved shelf in the library or are to be found in the textbook for the course. If students are to gather information on their own, it is necessary for them to learn the skills related to information source development. In most situations in which one is trying to gather information, it is necessary to phrase and ask the questions in a manner which invites

elaboration and not simply yes or no answers. A second sub-skill in gathering information orally is listening which includes the ability to restate what is heard in order to make sure it has been understood correctly. In addition, other information source network development skills are needed. These include such things as asking for suggestions of other possible contacts and being able to identify appropriate and key informants in unfamiliar social environments, and knowing where to turn for information.

4. A fourth basic skill is that of value clarification. Most students in the 18-22 year old category have inherited their values from their parents and the social environment in which they have grown up. They have not as yet made these values their own. This is, in fact, part of the process that they are going through--the process of becoming aware of the values that inform their behavior, evaluating their appropriateness for their present stage in life, and determining whether or not they wish to continue to place emphasis and priority on these values. This process of identifying and clarifying one's own values is related to many dimensions of experiential learning. It is related to cultural and environmental understanding. You have to know your own values before you can compare them with those of other people. It is often in cross-cultural or strange environmental circumstances that students become aware of their own values because of the contrast between what they believe to be important and what those with whom they work or live value. Clarification of values is also very important for self-understanding, decision making, problem solving, and for effective functioning in task-oriented placements.

B. Skills Needed In Applying Experiential Learning Theory

David Kolb, Professor of Organizational Psychology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, has developed a theory of applied experiential learning* which is cyclical in character. It begins with concrete experience followed by observation and reflection on that experience, leads to the development of general principles, concepts or hypotheses based on what has been experienced, observed and on reflection. The final step in the process is the active testing of these principles, concepts, hypotheses. One of our concerns in experiential learning is to help students learn how to learn on their own. One way to do that would be to help them acquire the skills necessary to apply this learning theory. We have already talked about the skills of observation and reflection. In addition, we could help students develop the capability of abstract conceptualization: how to take their observations and reflections and develop general principles, concepts and hypotheses. Having developed the principles or concepts, they would need then to be able to test them to find if they are, in fact, workable. Kolb has found through his research with students in various disciplines, and professionals, that each person tends to use a learning style that s/he is most comfortable with--one found to be useful early in life. People in various professional fields have their own style. To learn by engaging in concrete experience, observation and reflection is a style used by many humanists. To rely heavily on learning through observation, reflection and abstract conceptualization is a style used by researchers. Learning through abstract conceptualization and active experimentation is the usual style

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* Kolb, David. Learning Style Inventory, Technical Manual. McBer and Co., 137 Newberry St., Boston, Mass. 02116, 1976.

of engineers. Managers tend to learn through active experimentation and concrete experience. The Kolb theory is that, once established in life, people begin to develop the aspects of this cyclical learning process that are weakest for them. Helping students learn the process could facilitate growth and development in learning styles.

C. Learning On Your Own

Alan Tough, a Canadian adult educator, reports through his research on adult learners that most adults use a mixture of experiential learning (ala Kolb) and traditional learning. That is, they usually learn from a person, through a book, television, movie, by example or a lecture, and then try out experientially what they have learned. There are three areas where traditional learning skills could serve students in field experience education well: career exploration, creative problem solving and developing learning objectives.

1. Career exploration. Students could be helped to use field experience education placements to more fully explore career possibilities. There are a number of things we could help them learn that would be useful: how to identify already acquired transferrable skills by introducing them to Richard Boles' Quick Job Hunting Map*, how to compare these skills with those needed in various careers through the Dictionary of Occupational Titles and other occupational information resources, and how to write resumes and be effective in employment interviews.
2. Creative problem solving. Students could learn a creative problem solving process and practice it during the internship to improve their problem solving capability.

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* Boles, Richard. Quick Job Hunting Map. 10 Speed Press, Box 4310, Berkeley, CA, 94704, 1975.

3. Develop learning objectives. Most field experience education placements differ from one another so greatly that it is impossible to select specific learning objectives that can be accomplished by all students in every placement they secure. Since this is the case, the best we may be able to do is describe broad educational goals and list under these alternative learning objectives that might be possible in a number of placements. The students' task then is to identify, with the help of their faculty advisors and placement supervisors, the learning objectives appropriate to their placements. In addition to providing students with a range of alternative learning objectives from which to select, there is an additional service we might provide. We could help students learn to write their own educational objectives within these broad goals. This would encourage them to assume greater responsibility for their own learning and assist them in becoming life-long learners.

III. How to Facilitate Acquisition of these Skills:

In this section of the paper there will only be two things provided: a basic set of assumptions and the challenge to better prepare students for experiential learning.

A. Assumptions

1. We should place as much responsibility as possible on the students for the acquiring of these skills.
2. More effective learning will result if it is discovery learning, confirmed by appropriate authorities.
3. Students will be encouraged to assume responsibility for their learning to the extent that we entrust it to them; they have the developmental readiness, the necessary resources (skills) and are provided with structured means of reporting the results and reflecting on them.

4. We should identify and design processes through which these skills can be learned.

B. How to Facilitate the Acquisition of the Skills

Early in the experience of Peace Corps training, Peace Corps volunteers were sent to college and university campuses to acquire understanding of the cultures into which they were going, expertise in sociology, psychology, anthropology and political science. It was found that while this was useful and important learning, it did not prepare the Peace Corps volunteers for their responsibilities and roles as change agents in an alien culture. We cannot afford to make the same mistake; for us there are two basic challenges, to:

1. Identify minimum basic skills needed by students for accomplishing the learning goals of our programs.
2. Develop experiential learning occasions through which students can acquire these skills prior to their field experience placements.

John S. Duley